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Progressives See Chance to Push Democrats Left With Open Seats

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Body

(Bloomberg) - Progressive groups see an opening to expand their influence in Congress thanks to President Joe Biden.

With three special elections in coming months to replace Democratic House members tapped by Biden for jobs in his administration, the organizations that helped elect Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other young progressives in recent elections see those races as chances to nudge the Democratic caucus further to the left.

"The more seats that progressives hold in Congress, the more leverage and power they have over legislative negotiations that occur in Congress," said Waleed Shahid, spokesperson for Justice Democrats, which made its mark backing Ocasio-Cortez and other members of the so-called squad in the 2018 election.

All three special elections are in solidly Democratic districts, so the results won't change the balance of power in the House, and they are to replace liberal lawmakers. But Justice Democrats and other progressive groups are aiming to keep shifting the center of gravity in the Democratic caucus further left - potentially adding to the challenges of Democrats from swing districts trying to hold on to their seats in next year's midterm election to preserve the party's narrow House majority.

The first election is for a Louisiana seat vacated by Cedric Richmond, now Biden's head of public engagement. That race is going to a run-off in April between progressive candidate Karen Carter Peterson and centrist Troy Carter.

Primaries for the special election to fill the Ohio seat vacated by Marcia Fudge, now the secretary of Housing and Urban Development, will be held in August, with the general election taking place in November. Progressives are backing Nina Turner, while establishment Democrats are rallying behind Shontel Brown, chair of the Democratic Party in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Turner has been endorsed by both the Congressional Progressive Caucus Political Action Committee and Justice Democrats.

Biden's new secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, is the first Native American to hold the role and an advocate for the Green New Deal. Her New Mexico House seat will also be filled in a special election. The Congressional Progressive Caucus PAC has not endorsed anyone for that June 1 special election, but is looking to do so in about a week.

'Talented Group'

Fudge and Haaland both were part of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, which has about 90 members and roots going back to 1991. But newer groups like Justice Democrats and the Sunrise Movement, which is focused on climate change, have been pushing Democrats to move more aggressively on progressive policy priorities and backing challengers to centrist Democratic incumbents.

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Representative Mark Pocan of Wisconsin, co-chair of the Progressive Caucus PAC, said the new crop of progressives elected in 2018 and 2020 are changing the caucus and the overall movement.

"It's a really talented group of younger progressives that got elected," Pocan said. They're "people who bring real-life experience from their communities, often as organizers, something we don't have nearly enough of in Congress."

Pocan sees increasing progressive ranks in Congress as a way to get their proposals moved forward in a "faster and more aggressive" way.

Policy Priorities

Turner and Carter Peterson are both advocates for increasing the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour, as well as other progressive priorities like Medicare for All and the Green New Deal.

Progressives notched some wins in the \$1.9 trillion virus-relief bill Biden signed into law earlier this month, including expanding the child tax credit and the Affordable Care Act. But they also took some losses when the \$15 minimum wage hike was left out of the package and the Senate shrank the pool of individuals eligible to receive stimulus checks.

Progressives have not given up on a minimum wage increase - an idea that has become increasingly mainstream in the Democratic party. During a press call on Monday, Representative Ro Khanna of California said that the measure needs to be passed by the end of the year, even if they have to use procedural maneuvers to get around Republican opposition.

And Democrats would still have to convince centrist senators like West Virginia's Joe Manchin and Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema to get on board.

Climate Justice

Pocan said progressives have been in contact with the White House about increasing the minimum wage and he sees a "strong commitment" from the Biden administration to get this done.

Progressives will also be pushing Biden to include clean energy and climate provisions in the infrastructure package that will be his administration's next priority. Biden's proposal could cost roughly \$3 trillion over 10 years with some \$400 billion dedicated to green initiatives.

But some organizations have already said that's not enough. The Sunrise Movement said while initial reports about the proposal meet some demands of the climate justice movement, the scale of the challenge requires much more investment.

"While this recommendation would be a huge step forward, the crises we face demand at least \$1 trillion per year over the next decade," the Sunrise Movement wrote in a statement. "\$3 trillion is simply not enough to create jobs in the national interest, combat the climate crisis and support working people."

The pressure from the newer progressive groups has created some tension in the party without, so far, expanding the Democratic power base. Two progressives - Representatives Katie Porter of California and Andy Levin of Michigan - were elected in swing districts in 2018, but progressives did not flip any Republican-held seats in the 2020 election.

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